

Daodejing

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The Daodejing's legend

"The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao": thus begins the *Tao Te Ching* (*Daodejing* in the Pinyin romanisation adopted in this book) the foundational text of Taoism (or Daoism). Its title can be translated as *The Book of the Way and of Virtue*, or *The Classic of the Way and its Virtue*, or *The Book of the Way and its Power*, since the primary meaning of *dao* is 'way, path', *de*, as a first approximation, can be translated as 'virtue' or 'power', and *jing* means 'book' or 'classic'.

Therefore, "the Way that can be talked about is not the eternal Way" is the first, fundamental statement of the book. Which then keeps talking about the Dao, the Way, throughout the following eighty-one chapters. We then need to understand what this word *dao* stands for, and we need to understand the paradox of this short and very dense booklet (a little more than 5000 characters) that starts by declaring its own subject unspeakable.

A first key to the paradox is contained in the legend surrounding the origin of the book, as it is narrated by Sima Qian (145-86 BCE), the first great Chinese historian. To the *Shiji*, the *Records of the Historian*, by Sima Qian we owe the earliest information we have about the *Daodejing* and its author. This author is traditionally known as Lao Tzu, in the old Wade-Jiles romanisation, or Laozi, in Pinyin, a generic term meaning 'old (*lao*) master (*zi*)'. It is customary to refer

also to the book itself by the name of the author: therefore I will often say 'the *Laozi*', meaning the book, and 'Laozi', meaning the author.

Sima Qian expounds various hypotheses about the identity of the 'old master'. But the story he gives most credit to, and the one that has taken roots in the subsequent Chinese tradition, describes him as a senior contemporary of Kong Fuzi, Confucius (551-479 BCE), the renowned master that left such a profound imprint in Chinese culture. Since Confucius' dates are well-established, if we believe Sima Qian's account, Laozi must have lived in the sixth century BCE.

Modern scholars strongly doubt this chronology. The prevalent opinion places the composition of the *Daodejing* not in the sixth, but in the fourth or third century BCE, and considers the figure of the 'old master' purely legendary. In fact, various elements indicate that the book is probably a compilation of pre-existing fragments, the result of a process of accretion that took place in the course of various decades, if not centuries. The manuscripts found at Guodian and at Mawangdui suggest that this accretion process was still going on around 300 BCE, while it had reached a more or less final form in 200 BCE.

To be considered a purely legendary figure would not have displeased Laozi at all, as the great German sinologist Richard Wilhelm humorously pointed out. In fact, Sima Qian tells us that Laozi "cultivated the Way and its virtue," and "in his studies he strove to conceal himself and be unknown."¹ He adds that his personal name was Li Er and that he was the historian in charge of the royal archives of Zhou, the dynasty whose power extended over a large part of China from 1122 to 256 BCE.

The most prominent episode in Sima Qian's narrative is an encounter between Laozi and Confucius, who would have travelled to Zhou in order to consult the 'old master' about rituals. (In order to appreciate the humour of the story, most likely a later invention of the Daoist school, we should keep in mind that the Confucians paid the highest respect to rites, tradition and the teachings handed down from antiquity, while the Daoists chided them about all that.) Laozi gives Confucius a good dressing-down, starting with: "As for the things you are talking about - those people along with their bones have already rotted away! All that remains is their words..." After this meeting Confucius would have told his disciples: "As for birds, I understand how they can fly; with fish, I understand how they can swim; and with animals, I understand how they can run... But when it comes to dragons, I cannot understand how they ascend into the sky riding the winds and the clouds. Today I met Laozi, and he's just like a dragon!"

¹ *Shiji* 63, quoted in Robert G. Henricks, *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching, A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000, p. 133.

Sima Qian then goes on narrating the origin of the *Daodejing* in the following terms: "[Laozi] lived in Zhou for a long time. But, seeing the decline of the Zhou, he decided to leave. When he reached the checkpoint at the pass, Yin Xi, the official in charge of the pass, said to him: 'Sir, you are about to retire. You must make an effort to write us a book.' So Laozi wrote a book in two sections, explaining the ideas of the Way and its virtue in something over five thousand words, and left. No one knows how he ended."²

The origin of this fundamental work would therefore have been, according to this account an accident, an old man's second thought, moved by the request of a lonely customs officer on a remote Western pass on the edge of nothingness. Had it not been for this fortuitous encounter, Laozi would not have written anything. In fact, how can you write of that which cannot be told? Two thousand five hundred years later Wittgenstein will close his *Tractatus* with the famous statement: "Whereof one cannot speak one must be silent."³ Laozi felt the same way. In fact, does he not say in Chapter 56: "Those who know do not speak, those who speak do not know"?

But, legendary as this story may be, it conveys something profound. It reflects a dilemma which is confronting all mystics. The experience of the ultimate reality is incommunicable. It is the same dilemma Gautam Buddha encounters after his enlightenment: his first emotional response is one of discouragement for the impossibility to formulate in words the treasure he has found. But compassion for the suffering and confusion of the sentient beings imposes upon him to try to communicate the incommunicable.

The same is true about Laozi. He takes up the challenge to speak the unspeakable. His writing will only be 'a finger pointing at the moon'. But, if people are not to mistake the finger for the moon (which they are always very prone to do!), the unspeakableness is the first thing that needs to be spoken. Where Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* ends, there the *Daodejing* begins.⁴

² Ibid.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, statement 7 (1921).

⁴ There is an interesting poem by Bertolt Brecht about the encounter of Laozi with the customs officer. In the poem Yin Xi doesn't know Laozi. He asks what does the old man teach. The child accompanying the sage on his journey into exile says: "Oh, he teaches something like that the soft overcomes the hard; that water, the weakest of all substances, excavates rocks." (See Chapter 78.) Yin Xi gets interested and wants to know more: he invites the old man and the child to stay with him. For seven days they stay, and Laozi writes away his eighty-one chapters. At the end Brecht remarks that the student is just as essential as the teacher in making the miracle of transmission possible. For an English version of the poem, see, e.g., http://www.penninetaichi.co.uk/index_files/Page1090.htm.

Dao, 道

What is then this *dao*?

dao way, road, path; lead, connect; course, conduit; way to be followed, guiding principle, norm, doctrine; follow a doctrine, be adept of; the Tao, the Way; art, method; magical or technical work; power of the diviner, magician or king; rule, govern; discourse, say, teach, speak, explain, express, communicate; know, realize.⁵

Like most Chinese characters, *dao* embraces a vast range of meanings. These meanings are in some way interconnected, they flow into each other by what we could call a 'free association' process. Most of the meanings of *dao* are older than Daoism: the word was already in current use when the Daoists took it over, so to speak, and gave it a new and specific meaning that, following conventional use, I capitalise: the Dao, the Way. In order to understand this new and specific meaning, it is good to get an idea of how the word was used in the philosophical debate in China at the time of the composition of the *Laozi*.

This debate was first and foremost epistemological and ethical: the key questions were how to decide between true and false, right and wrong, what are the guiding principles for correct behavior and what is the ultimate foundation of social norms. The discussion was therefore about *dao*'s, about guiding principles, norms, and about discourses, arguments, reasons offered as evidence for those. The two main schools of thought facing each other in the philosophical arena were the Confucians, tracing their origin to Confucius (551-479 BCE), and the Mohists, tracing their origin to Mozi, circa 480 BCE. In highly simplified terms, their controversy can be described as follows.

The Confucians were traditionalist. They located the ultimate ethical authority in the ways of the ancient sage-kings, as carried down by tradition and embodied in social norms and rituals. One of their main concerns was the 'rectification of names', i.e. the appropriate use of language. Correct naming, correct behavior and correct order in the family and in society were seen as intimately related and essentially a matter of returning to an older and purer tradition in order to overcome the disorder and corruption of the present times.

The Mohists, on the other hand, were innovators and reformers. While the Confucians " were priests specializing in cultural and ritual performance... the Mohists were carpenters, engineers, military strategists. The standards of success for them [were] more world-guided and less socially dependent..."⁶

⁵ Instituts Ricci (Paris-Taïpei), *Dictionnaire Ricci de caractères chinois*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1999 (simplified, my translation).

⁶ Chad Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

They claimed that traditional norms, being a human creation, were not necessarily intrinsically correct or universally valid. Their ideal was an impartially selected social norm of behavior, an unbiased universal ethics. They attempted to ground such an ethics in an objective utilitarianism, based on a natural distinction between benefit and harm.

In this debate the Daoist intervened in a radical way, questioning the fundamental assumptions of both camps. Mohists and Confucians were disagreeing about which was the correct *dao* for the individual and for society. The Daoists questioned the very existence of a correct *dao*. They asked: how can one say that a particular *dao* is right or wrong? Is there a constant, universal *dao*? Can one claim an absolute right and an absolute wrong? Or are true and false, right and wrong, inevitably relative and context-dependent?

Mohists and Confucians were debating about the proper foundation of the ethical norms that have to guide society. The Daoists questioned the usefulness of imposing ethical norms, any ethical norms, upon human beings. In their eyes ethical norms were a poor replacement for the spontaneous wisdom, the authenticity and simplicity of the natural human being. They were convinced that the very effort to improve things was taking the first step in the wrong direction and ultimately increasing disorder. Better, they thought, to abstain from interfering in the course of nature, to adopt a minimal form of action that they described as 'non-action' or 'non-doing' (we will meet this idea over and over in the *Laozi*), to revert to a natural condition represented by the metaphor of the uncarved block of wood', or 'the simplicity of the newborn'.

Dao ke dao...

Let us reconsider the first verse of the *Daodejing* in the light of the philosophical context that has been briefly outlined above. The verse consists of six characters: *dao*⁴ *ke*³ *dao*⁴ *fei*¹ *chang*² *dao*⁴.

*dao*⁴ way, road, path; way to be followed, guiding principle, norm, doctrine; the Tao, the Way; art, method; power; rule, govern; discourse, say, teach, speak, communicate

*ke*³ permit, consent, possible, can, may, able to, truly

*dao*⁴ way, road, path; way to be followed, guiding principle, norm, doctrine; the Tao, the Way; art, method; power; rule, govern; discourse, say, teach, speak, communicate

*fei*¹ not to be, not, different, opposition, contradiction

*chang*² constant, lasting, always, frequent, absolute, permanent

*dao*⁴ way, road, path; way to be followed, guiding principle, norm, doctrine; the Tao, the Way; art, method; power; rule, govern; discourse, say, teach, speak, communicate

Some possible readings of this verse are:

"a way that can be spoken/taught/communicated is not a constant/eternal way,"

"a norm/doctrine that can be spoken/taught/communicated is not a constant/eternal norm/doctrine,"

"a discourse/teaching that can be spoken/taught/communicated is not a constant/eternal discourse/teaching,"

"all guidance that can be spoken/taught/communicated is not constant/eternal guidance."

All of these correspond to the epistemological position of the Daoists that has been outlined above. At this level the verse says that all discourse is contingent, all prescriptive norms are relative, no representation of reality is unconditional, there is no ultimate foundation for epistemology and ethics.

That is essentially the realization that is also the foundation of postmodern thought. A classic formulation of it is Korzybski's famous statement that "the map is not the territory"⁷: a seemingly obvious statement, which taken in a larger metaphorical sense has a devastating impact on all attempts to capture reality in a system of thought. Korzybski is saying that as soon as we try to describe reality in any kind of language, we are creating a map. The universe of discourse is the universe of maps: reality, the 'territory', is forever beyond it.

Another beautiful, ironic statement of the same realization, one that no doubt would have delighted Laozi and Zhuangzi, is Magritte's pipe. In 1929 the

⁷ The statement first appeared in a paper Korzybski presented before the American Mathematical Society in New Orleans in 1931.

Belgian surrealist René Magritte produced the following work, entitled *The Treachery of Images*:



Of course the 'treachery' Magritte is talking about is not limited to images, but extends to all forms of representation. A pervasive human error is the reification of our mental constructs (mistaking the map for the territory, in Korzybski's language).

Nevertheless, while Daoism and post-modern thought share the same relativistic epistemology as their starting point, they radically diverge in the conclusions they draw from it. Reality is unspeakable, it is forever beyond the universe of discourse: this is the common starting point. Then post-modern thought chooses to forego 'reality' and to concentrate on the universe of discourse as creator of intersubjective realities, of social worlds. The interest of Daoists, on the other hand, is entirely focused on the unspeakable reality. Their interest in the sphere of discourse is merely critical and ironic. The existential dimension is the only one that counts for them.

Therefore they invent a new meaning of the word *dao*, they use it to point to the *dao* that is beyond all *dao*'s, the one I have chosen to call 'the Dao' (Chinese does not have capital letters!). The Dao is that which is beyond the universe of discourse, that which has no name and therefore can be spoken of only in paradox and allusion. The Dao is that which is 'older than heaven and earth'; it is 'the mother of the myriad beings'; it is the creative 'emptiness' preceding the duality of subject and object, consciousness and world, the 'emptiness' from which everything originates and to which everything returns.

When we keep in mind this other use of the word *dao*, we can enlarge our readings of the first verse of the *Daodejing* to include the following:

"all *dao*'s that can be spoken about are not the eternal/constant Dao,"

"all ways that can be spoken/taught/communicated are not the eternal/constant Way,"

"Dao, when talked about, is no longer the eternal/constant Dao,"

and even, concisely, with Addiss and Lombardo:

"Dao called Dao is not Dao."

These new meanings do not exclude those we have seen before. The Chinese text embraces them all. It is a characteristic of classical Chinese (a characteristic that makes it a wonderful tool for poetry) that each word contains a multiplicity of resonances and each sentence can be read in various ways. But this is particularly true of Daoist texts: it is characteristic of the Daoist spirit to welcome the opposites as complementary and to hold different interpretations of the same thing. Consider, e.g., this passage of the *Zhuangzi*, the other great classic of Daoism, roughly contemporary or slightly posterior to the *Laozi*:

So I say, 'that' comes out of this and 'this' depends on 'that' - which is to say that 'this' and 'that' give birth to each other. But where there is birth there must be death; where there is death there must be birth. Where there is acceptability there must be unacceptability; where there is unacceptability there must be acceptability. Where there is recognition of right there must be recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong there must be recognition of right. Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of Heaven. He too recognizes a 'this', but a 'this' which is also 'that', a 'that' which is also 'this'. His 'that' has both a right and a wrong in it; his 'this' too has both a right and a wrong in it. So, in fact, does he still have a 'this' and 'that'? Or does he in fact no longer have a 'this' and 'that'? A state in which 'this' and 'that' no longer find their opposites is called the axis of the Way.

(*Zhuangzi 2, On Making All Things Equal*)⁸

Or this passage from Chapter 2 of the *Laozi*:

When in the world all appreciate beauty as beauty,
then ugliness is already there;
when all appreciate good as good,
then bad is already there.

Therefore being and non-being generate each other,
difficult and easy complete each other,
long and short define each other,
high and low lean towards each other,
voice and music harmonise with each other,

⁸ Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, Columbia University Press, New York and London, 1968, p. 40.

before and after follow each other.

This book is therefore an invitation to read the *Laozi* in a frame of mind "in which this and that no longer find their opposites". It wants to be a 'Daoist' translation of the *Laozi*, one that allows the reader to embrace and hold together various readings of the text without necessarily having to choose: looking at them instead as layers of meaning that can complete and enrich each other.

Archeology of the Laozi

The text of the *Laozi* on which this book is based is the so-called 'standard version', which came down to us with commentary by the third century neo-Daoist philosopher Wang Bi (226-249 CE). It consists of 81 short chapters and is divided in two parts: the first one, *Dao*, comprising 37 chapters, is often described as more metaphysical, while the second part, *De*, comprising the remaining 44 chapters, is supposed to deal more specifically with the manifestation of virtue in the human world (e.g. its application in governing the state). This traditional partition by subject matter, though, corresponds only very vaguely to the actual content of the two sections: in both sections metaphysical considerations and practical suggestions are interspersed.

As I said, various elements suggest that this text is most likely a compilation of pre-existent materials. Many chapters consists of fragments only vaguely related to each other, and some fragments recur identical or with slight variations in different chapters. Modern historians and philologists give little credit to Sima Qian's narrative and to the authorship by a single person, the 'old master' who would have been a contemporary of Confucius. The big open questions about the origin of the *Laozi* are therefore: where did the material gathered in the text we have received come from? When did it come to be recognized as a single work? When did it become associated with the figure of Laozi?

Until four decades ago we had scarcely any evidence concerning the vicissitudes of the text before the standard version. Then two important discoveries intervened to offer us precious insights into its early history.

The first was the unearthing in 1973 of a real archaeological treasure in a Han tomb near the small village of Mawangdui, in the Hunan province. The findings included two silk manuscripts of the *Daodejing*. Since the entombment can be dated precisely at 168 BCE, we have an excellent term *ante quem* for the two Mawangdui manuscripts. The prevalent opinion among scholars places their compilation at around 200 BCE.

The two manuscripts (labeled Mawangdui A and B) present only minor differences from each other and, in terms of content, from the standard version.

Their form, though, differs significantly from that of the standard version: in both manuscripts the division in chapters is missing and the order of the two sections of the book, *Dao* and *De*, is reversed. Within each part the material is ordered roughly like in the standard version, but there are various exceptions.

There is no consensus about the significance of the reversal of *Dao* and *De*. Some scholars feel that the Mawangdui order reflects that of an 'original' *Laozi*. Others surmise that two different versions of the book were circulating at the beginning of the second century BCE, a *Daodejing*, used by Daoists, and a *Dedaojing*, used by the Legalist school. A third opinion attributes the Mawangdui order simply to a packaging mishap. While the Mawangdui texts are written on silk, the most common support for written texts in China throughout the first millennium BCE consisted of thin bamboo strips tied together in bundles. If the *Laozi* at some point consisted of two such bundles, *Dao* and *De*, one can easily imagine a reversal of the order of the two bundles in the course of repeated copying processes.

The other significant piece of archaeological evidence comes from the excavation of a tomb in Guodian, Jingmen city, Hubei province, in 1993. The Guodian tomb is located near the old capital of the state of Chu and can be dated approximately to the year 300 BCE. The findings include 730 inscribed bamboo strips containing over 13,000 characters. Of these, 71 strips, amounting to about 2,000 characters, match various parts of the *Laozi*.

The 'bamboo strip *Laozi*' consists of three distinct manuscripts (Guodian A, B and C), differing from each other for style of writing, details of bamboo strips and number of characters inscribed on each. It is therefore natural to infer that they were different books (or parts thereof) rather than parts of a single whole. The text is divided in chapters (31 altogether) and the content of the chapters is, on the whole, consistent with the standard version, although there are numerous variant and/or archaic characters and some verses in some of the chapters are missing. The order of the chapters in the Guodian manuscripts is to a large extent guesswork, since the strips were found scattered in mud and water at the bottom of the tomb. It is interesting to notice, though, that, when an order can be inferred (i.e., when two strips can be placed sequentially because the text of a chapter continues from a strip onto the next one), this order does not match either that of Mawangdui or that of the standard version.

What can we make of all this? Assuming the standard version (the text accompanied by Wang Bi's commentary) as the 'definitive' form of the work, the silk manuscripts of Mawangdui seem to be fairly close to a final stage of compilation. The Guodian manuscripts, on the other hand, while witnessing the existence of large portions of the text at an earlier date, do not offer any evidence that a complete text of the *Laozi* existed at the time. They might have been excerpted from one or more versions of a larger work (more likely from different versions, since the only sequence of verses that recurs in two of the

Guodian manuscripts presents significant differences in the two cases), and such a work might have been already associated with the name of Laozi; but the Guodian manuscripts offer no indication of that. One can just as easily imagine that their content is textual 'raw material' that only later came to be incorporated into the book we know as the *Laozi*.

Waiting for further evidence from archaeology, the most likely guess at present is that the text we know came about through a gradual work of compilation beginning in the fourth century BCE. At some point this body of wisdom sayings came to be attributed to an 'old master' (older than Confucius, the master *par excellence!*), a fairly common procedure in ancient China when a school of thought wanted to confer authority and prestige on their particular theory. In the Daojiao (the religious version of Daoism) the legend of the 'old master' became later a cult, and Laozi became a god.

Legendary or not, the figure of the 'old master' is dear to all the students of the *Daodejing*. Whoever speaks to us from these pages has some rather extraordinary things to say. Why not give him/her/them a name? Out of old habit I keep calling this mysterious ancient friend 'Laozi', 'old master'. In my commentary I keep referring to the author/s of these texts by that name. Forgive me, then, old master, if in this Introduction I treat you as non-existent: I know you do not mind.

The Laozi and physics

The main goal of this book is not to provide a new interpretation of the *Laozi*, but to allow a number of different interpretations to co-exist and to interact. But I wouldn't be honest if I claimed to be exclusively a neutral compiler. The translation I offer, and even more my commentary, propose a reading of the *Laozi* that reflects to some extent my personal path through life and my passions. It may be useful, then, in order to contextualise that more personal aspect of the work, to briefly describe its underlying philosophy. I will start from a place that looks at first sight rather removed from our subject, namely the worldview suggested by quantum physics, which has been my original field of study.

Strangely enough, a difficult problem for quantum physics is something that ordinarily we take completely for granted: the existence of an objective world, a world of 'things', 'objects', endowed with intrinsic properties. The notion of object, that had an obvious metaphysical status in the positive thinking of the nineteenth century, suddenly found itself on very shaky ground with quantum physics.

The problematic status of objectivity in quantum physics is a consequence of a radical change in our understanding of the process of observation. In classical physics describing what happens when we perform an observation posed no special problem. On one side we had the observer, on the other we had the observed system, endowed with intrinsic properties essentially unaffected by observation process, and the observer would simply take note of them. In quantum physics, on the other hand, the observation process has a much more active role. It has been described as a 'creative act', since though it some previously undefined property of the observed system takes a definite value.

The idea that a system may be in an undefined state unless it is observed is a radically novel one. In the jargon of quantum physics this is called 'a superposition of states': we can think of it as the simultaneous presence of various potentialities. It is only the act of observation that causes the superposition of states to 'collapse' into a definite state.

The notion of a superposition of states has no analogue in classical physics or in our intuitive representation of the world. In fact, it contradicts our ordinary notion of 'thing', 'object', 'matter', which we think of as something that is as it is, whether it is observed or not. If for the sake of brevity we indicate by the term 'realism' this property of 'being as it is independently from being observed or not', then quantum physics is not a 'realistic' theory.

Another fundamental characteristic of our ordinary notion of 'matter' is that it is localised in space: a thing occupies a certain portion of space and can interact with another thing situated in another portion of space only through some physical effect, some 'signal' propagating in space from one to the other. If for the sake of brevity we call this characteristic 'locality', then our ordinary representation of the world is both 'realistic' and 'local', while quantum physics is neither 'realistic' nor 'local'.

Such a deep change in worldview is not easily assimilated: it requires an effort of the imagination going beyond habitual modes of thinking. It is not surprising, therefore, that almost a century after the inception of the theory this transformation has not seeped down into our everyday consciousness, it has not reached the place where we process information about the world and make decisions about acting. It is, in a sense, a stalled conceptual revolution.

Even with some of the creators of quantum theory these radically new ideas did not go down easily. The most ardent opponent of quantum physics' lack of 'realism' was Albert Einstein, who for eight years fiercely discussed this issue with Niels Bohr, the head of the Copenhagen school, home of the so-called orthodox interpretation of quantum physics. Einstein's provocative question, "Does the moon exist when you are not looking at it?", has remained famous. Einstein believed that quantum theory conveyed only a temporary and incomplete understanding: underlying it there should be a more fundamental

level, where all the nonsense of quantum physics would dissolve and the existence of an objective world would again be vindicated.

In 1935, with the help of two colleagues, he devised a *Gedankenexperiment*, a 'thought experiment', that would prove beyond all doubt the incompleteness of quantum theory. The imaginary experiment pushed the non-realist, non-local character of quantum theory to its extreme consequences, leading to results so counterintuitive as to appear manifestly absurd. The EPR experiment, as it came later to be known from the initials of its three authors, was felt as a substantial blow by Bohr and the other defenders of the orthodox interpretation.

The Copenhagen interpretation nevertheless stood its ground, mostly for lack of an adequate alternative: the EPR experiment and the underlying philosophical issue of the objectivity of the world went dormant for almost thirty years. Then in 1964 an unexpected mathematical development took place: the Irish physicist John Bell analysed the EPR experiment in purely logical terms assuming the properties of realism and locality. From these two assumptions he deduced a certain inequality that the results had to fulfill. Bell's inequality, on the other hand, was violated by the predictions of quantum theory (which, as we have seen above, is neither 'realistic' nor 'local').

Bell's work brought back the EPR experiment to the attention of the scientific community. In fact, Bell's theorem offered an extraordinary opportunity: if the experiment could be realised, it would be a litmus test able to distinguish between quantum physics on one hand and the set of all possible, present or future, local-realistic theories on the other. The question "does or does not the world admit an objective description?" was therefore coming as close as a philosophical question ever had come to an experimental test!

Turning the thought experiment into a real one, and performing it in a water-tight way, so that the predictions of quantum physics and those of realism-locality could be unequivocally distinguished, was a considerable technological challenge. It took a few more years before that challenge could be met. Around 1980 the experiments started to bring in results. Alain Aspect in Paris performed the first really conclusive experiment. In it the 'manifestly absurd' predictions of quantum theory were fully verified, violating Bell's inequality and therefore excluding the possibility of any local-realistic interpretation.

The only condition implicit in the interpretation of the experiments performed by Aspects and others is Einstein's relativity's hypothesis that the speed of light is the maximum admissible speed for the transmission of 'signals'. Assuming that this hypothesis is correct, we can safely state that the world does not admit an objective description. The world, in other words, is not made of things. In our descent into the heart of matter we have run into a surprising discovery: matter does not exist! Or, to state this conclusion a bit more cautiously: matter is

something profoundly different from the representation we have of it, something which we cannot clearly separate from what we call 'mind' or 'consciousness'.

The difficulties involved in the Cartesian notion of mind and matter as two separate substances emerge most clearly when we analyse a bit more in detail the quantum description of the process of observation. In fact this description involves an interesting enigma, called 'the measurement problem', still unsolved almost a century after the inception of the theory. Or, to state it a bit more cautiously: an enigma whose interpretation and solution are still debated within the scientific community. Discussing the measurement problem we are therefore on shiffter ground: inevitably some of the things I will say reflect my personal view.

The problem concerns the transition I have hinted at above, going from an initial superposition of states to a well defined state at the end of the measurement process. More specifically, initially we have a microscopic system in a superposition of states and a measuring apparatus in some 'ready' initial state. Then the two interact for some time. At the end the microscopic system is in a well defined state and the apparatus has shifted to a state indicating the corresponding measurement result. This is what we observe in practice and what we would like the theory to be able to describe. The problem is that a consistent quantum theoretical description of this transition does not exist. A fundamental characteristic of quantum dynamics is in fact that it always leads from a superposition of states to another superposition of states, never from a superposition of states to a single well defined state.

The quantum measurement problem therefore essentially concerns how can the fluid and undefined microscopic world of quantum physics appear on our scale as a solid and well defined world, an objective world. It seems rather extraordinary that an extremely successful theory a hundred years after its birth still carries in its heart this 'black hole', the inability to describe the process which is its very foundation!

I should somewhat qualify the above statement. Not all physicists would agree with it. It is in fact possible to construct approximate solutions of the measurement problem, solutions that, while not being exact, approximate an exact solution so well as to be practically indistinguishable. My initial work on the quantum measurement problem actually dealt with the construction of such approximate solutions.⁹ Many, maybe most, physicists consider these solutions adequate and the problem solved. Others think that the solution must be sought at a more fundamental level. That is also my present conviction, and it brought

⁹ L. Lanz, G.M. Proserpi e A. Sabbadini, *Time Scales and the Problem of Measurement in Quantum Mechanics*, Il Nuovo Cimento, **2B**, 184 (1971).

me to go back to work on the problem and to propose a more fundamental solution.¹⁰

Seeking the solution at a more fundamental level means questioning the philosophical premises implicit in the formulation of the problem. When we do this, we realise that in our physics there is still a basic 'perspective error': it is still formulated from the perspective of 'God's eye', of an observer standing outside the world. When we take into account that the looking eye is situated in the world and is part of a chain of interactions connecting it with that which is seen, we find that the seen world is inevitably conditioned by this 'embodied' nature of experience. Now, it is possible to prove that it is precisely this intrinsic, inevitable limitation of the field of vision of the embodied observer, this intrinsic, inevitable limitation of experience in the world, that makes the fluid and undefined world of quantum physics appear as a solid world of objects, as an objective world.

The objective world is not therefore something existing *per se*: it emerges in the process of experience due to some intrinsic, inevitable characteristics of the process itself. Symmetrically mind, or consciousness, comes into being through its experience of the world, i.e. it also originates in the process of experience. The elementary core of the experience of the world is a process in which consciousness and world, mind and matter, subject and object co-emerge from the undifferentiated non-dual background of existence.

The dominant worldview of our technological-scientific culture considers the existence of matter, the existence of the objective world as primary. Matter sits at center stage. Consciousness is generally seen as an epiphenomenon of certain material processes, an emergent property of the objective world that is generated when a nervous system with an adequate degree of complexity comes into being. That this view is inadequate to account for the specificity of the phenomenon of consciousness has been very well argued, e.g., by the Australian philosopher David Chalmers.¹¹ I claim that it is also inadequate to give a satisfactory description of the process of observation in quantum physics. Only a philosophy positing the act of experience as primary and the two poles of subject and object as co-emergent in it can embrace the worldview that quantum physics suggests.

Surprisingly, these considerations admit a very natural translation in the language of the *Laozi*. In this language the emergence of the fundamental duality of subject and object in the act of experience corresponds to 'naming', which is 'the mother of the myriad things/beings'. The 'nameless Dao', which is

¹⁰ S.A. Sabbadini, *Persistence of Information in the Quantum Measurement Problem*, Physics Essays, March 2006, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 135-150.

¹¹ David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1996.

'the origin of heaven and earth', is the undifferentiated background of existence, preceding or transcending the duality of subject and object. As such, the Dao eludes all possible experiencing: in fact, as soon as we have an experience a subject and an object arise, and we are already immersed in 'naming'.

The paradoxes of quantum physics invite us to move beyond the Cartesian partition of reality into *res cogitans* (mind) and *res extensa* (matter). The *Laozi* is already beyond such a partition. Funnily enough, the language of this ancient text seems more adequate than our contemporary scientific-technical language to comprehend the strange reality quantum physics shows us.

Eranos and the Yijing

This book has its origin in my decennial collaboration with the Dutch sinologist Rudolf Ritsema (1918-2006) at Eranos.¹² Eranos is an East-West study center created in 1933 by Olga Froebe-Kapteyn and Carl Gustav Jung at Ascona, Switzerland, on the shores of Lago Maggiore. At the height of its glory Eranos has been a crucible for high level interdisciplinary exchange between European intellectuals of the caliber of Ernst Benz, Martin Buber, Henry Corbin, Gilbert Durand, Mircea Eliade, James Hillman, Karl Kerényi, Erich Neumann, Herbert Pietschmann, Manfred Porkert, Adolf Portmann, Gershom Scholem, Erwin Schroedinger, Paul Tillich, Hellmut Wilhelm, Heinrich Zimmer. Beside being a place of high intellectual creativity it has always been a place of beauty and warm conviviality. Rudolf Ritsema succeeded the founder Olga Froebe at the helm of Eranos in 1962 and directed it for over thirty years.

My love affair with the *Laozi* dates from long before my arrival at Eranos, and I had already produced a couple of translations in the 80's and 90's. But the idea of a thorough word by word analysis of the text arose while working with Rudolf Ritsema at Eranos between 1994 and 2005. Ritsema had already devoted fifty years of his life to an in-depth study of the *Yijing* (the *Book of Changes* or *I Ching* in the old Wade-Giles romanisation system), and had devised an innovative style of translation aimed at allowing Western readers to access the multiple meanings of the oracular statements of that archaic text. I joined him in the last phase of this work and together we produced an Italian¹³ and an English¹⁴ translation of the *Yijing* based on these particular criteria.

The key criterion consisted in always translating a given Chinese character with the same Italian or English word, which would thus become an entry point into the range of meanings of the character. These then were thoroughly spelled out

¹² For information about the current activities of Eranos see www.erasosfoundation.org.

¹³ R. Ritsema and S.A. Sabbadini, *I Ching, il libro della versatilità*, Red Edizioni, Como, 1996.

¹⁴ R. Ritsema and S.A. Sabbadini, *The Original I Ching Oracle*, Watkins, London, 2005-

in a *Fields of meaning* section attached to each block of text. In accord with an old exegetic tradition, we considered the intrinsic indeterminacy of the *Yijing* texts an integral aspect of their oracular use. The reader or consultant was invited to use the *Fields of meaning* to reinterpret each sentence according to the specific context of her or his question and situation.

Inspired by the work with Ritsema, my original plan was to apply the same criteria to a translation of the *Daodejing*. But I soon had to realise that the different nature and much more mature language of this last work rendered such an approach inapplicable. The organisation of this book has therefore evolved along different lines compared with my work with Ritsema on the *Yijing*. Nevertheless some of the core idea, some of the intention remains. Again one of the main aims of this book is to allow each reader to develop his or her own specific approach to the *Laozi*, to engage in a personal conversation with the 'old master', unencumbered as far as possible by the preferences of the translator.

Organisation and use of this book

Each chapter of the book consists of various sections. These sections will be here described in order to facilitate their use.

Translation

The first page of each chapter contains a title, both in English and in Chinese characters, and a translation of the chapter. The translation is mine and attempts to be as literal as possible. Inevitably, though, it too is an interpretation. The reader will have the opportunity to compare it with other interpretations and to formulate her or his own interpretation, if so desired, with the tools provided in the following sections.

The titles are also mine: in the standard version (and in the Mawangdui and Guodian manuscripts) the chapters have no titles. I have simply selected a few words that seemed sufficiently descriptive from the chapter text.

Alternative translations

The next section contains a number of alternative translations that have been proposed for some passages of the chapter. In the first chapter, which is in a way a compendium of the whole book, I have given alternative translations for the entire chapter. In general, though, I have included only those passages for which significantly different interpretations exist. There are a few chapters about which

all translators are essentially in agreement: in those cases I have omitted the *Alternative translations* section.

The choice of the quoted translations is largely arbitrary. The number of translations of the *Daodejing* in existence is impressive. The choice is limited in the first place by the languages I am sufficiently familiar with: English, French and Italian. It is influenced to some extent by my personal preferences. But I have often included translations that, while not being among my favorites, proposed an interesting and/or unusual interpretation in that particular context. I have generally tried to include only translations offering significantly different interpretations. In many cases that has meant omitting some precious little jewels that would not particularly add to the overall range of meanings of the passage.

In the case of the English translations I have simply quoted the original translation. For the French and Italian ones, the quote is my translation, as literal as I have managed, of the original translation. The name of the translator is given in brackets after the quote. To get the complete bibliographical references of these works see *Bibliography, Laozi, Quoted translations*.

Commentary

A commentary section follows. Its purpose is primarily to elucidate the fundamental ideas contained in the chapter. In addition it includes comments of a slightly more technical nature concerning passages whose meaning is obscure or subject to different interpretations. Taken together with the textual analysis of the following section, *Verbatim translation*, these comments are meant to help the reader understand how the various interpretations of a given passage arise.

Verbatim translation

The purpose of this last section of the chapter is to allow the non-sinologist reader to get as close as possible to the original Chinese text of the *Laozi*. It has the form of a table with five columns. Each row of the table corresponds to a character of the text.

The **first column** on the left contains the Chinese text.

The **second column** contains the Pinyin romanisation of the Chinese characters of the text. The Pinyin system is a phonetic transcription of the Chinese: for the pronunciation of the Pinyin code see *Pinyin* at the end of this Introduction.

The **third column** contains the radicals of the Chinese characters according to the classification of the emperor Kang Xi (1654-1722). A radical is both a graphic element common to an entire family of characters and a first entry port into the domain of meaning of those characters. E.g., most characters whose

meaning has to do with thought or feeling share the radical 'heart', because the heart is for the Chinese the center of the mental and emotional life.

The **fourth column** is a verbatim translation of the Chinese text. It is a rough draft of the translation presented in the first page of the chapter. One should be aware, though, that a true verbatim translation of Chinese into English is impossible, because the Chinese sentence often has a different structure, a number of Chinese terms have a syntactic function that has no analogue in English, a pair of Chinese characters frequently corresponds to a single idea in English, etc.

The **fifth column** contains the fields of meaning of the Chinese terms. These are short dictionary entries, listing a number of meanings of that particular character. They are based on classic Chinese dictionaries in Western languages, particularly on the *Grand dictionnaire Ricci de la langue chinoise*,¹⁵ in seven volumes, the most complete dictionary of Chinese into any European language. The translation from French into English is mine. In the choice of meanings I have tried to include those potentially relevant for the context in which the term appears in the *Laozi*; but I have often included also meanings that, while not applicable in the specific context, seemed significant in defining the resonances of the given term.

Examples

The following examples illustrate some basic characteristics of the Chinese language as it is used in the *Laozi*, and can be used as a first introduction to the use of the *Verbatim translation* section of each chapter. A thorough discussion of the language of the *Laozi* would vastly surpass the boundaries of this Introduction. I leave it up to the curious reader to leisurely wander through the *Verbatim translation* and to make his or her discoveries.

Chapter 1

無	wu2	086, fire	Without	without, not, not be, not exist, nothing, void, hollow, emptiness, non-being, absence
名	ming2	030, mouth	name,	name, personal name, title, fame, reputation, word, ideogram
天	tian1	037, great	heaven	heaven, firmament, sky, nature; tian ¹ xia ⁴ : everything under heaven, the world

¹⁵ *Grand dictionnaire Ricci de la langue chinoise*, Institut Ricci (Paris-Taipei), Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 2001.

地	di4	032, earth	(and) earth	earth, ground, soil, field, region, place, disposition, substance
之	zhi1	004, oblique stroke	's	analogue of the saxon genitive; previously mentioned object; euphonic or final particle
始	shi3	038, woman	beginning,	begin, origin, initially, in the beginning (etym: beginning in and by a woman)

The verb 'to be' is generally implied. "The beginning of heaven and earth is without name," "That which is without name is the beginning of heaven and earth" are two acceptable translations of this passage.

The genitive case (or an adjectival phrase qualifying a noun) always precedes the noun it refers to. It is often (but not always) indicated by the particle *zhi*¹ (in this function comparable to the English 's) inserted between the genitive (or the adjectival phrase) and the noun it refers to: *tian*¹ (heaven) *di*⁴ (earth) *zhi*¹ ('s) *shi*³ (beginning), heaven and earth's beginning.

Chinese terms are grammatically multi-functional: they often can be used as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions. E.g., here *wu*² can be read as 'without' or 'not having', but also as 'that which is not', 'non-being'. And *ming*², 'name', can also be read as 'to name'. Therefore "non-being names heaven and earth's beginning" is another acceptable translation of this passage.

Chapter 2

天	tian1	037, great	(When) heaven	heaven, firmament, sky, nature; <i>tian</i> ¹ <i>xia</i> ⁴ : everything under heaven, the world
下	xia4	001, one	under	below, under, bottom, down, fall, descend, low; <i>tian</i> ¹ <i>xia</i> ⁴ : all under heaven, the world
皆	jie1	106, white	all	all, together, with, universal, of the same kind, similar, resemble, compare
知	zhi1	111, arrow	appreciate	know, be aware of, perceive, inform, discern, appreciate, understand, feel
美	mei3	123, sheep	beauty	delicious, savory, good, excellent, beautiful, elegant, refined, precious, delight in, praise (etym: sheep and big)
之	zhi1	004, oblique stroke		analogue of the saxon genitive; previously mentioned object; euphonic or final particle

為	wei2,4	087, claw	as	wei2: do, act, make, create, manage, be, become, attend to, consider as; wei4: for, because
美	mei3	123, sheep	beauty,	delicious, savory, good, excellent, beautiful, elegant, refined, precious, delight in, praise (etym: sheep and big)
斯	si1	069, axe	then	this, this way, then, consequently
惡	e4 wu4	061, heart	ugliness	e4: evil, cruel, perverse, vice, disease, ugly, dirty; wu4: hate, dislike, despise
已	yi3	049, oneself	is already there;	cease, finish, stop, complete, renounce, desist; final particle indicating past tense, an accomplished action

Subordinating conjunctions ('when' in this example) are often implied.

Spatial adpositions (like 'below', 'above', 'in front', 'behind'), which are prepositions in English, are postponed in Chinese. *Tian*¹ (heaven) *xia*⁴ (under) is therefore 'under heaven': it indicates all there is under heaven, i.e. the world (or the empire, which practically coincided with the world for the Chinese).

The particle *zhi*¹ is here used to join the adjectival phrase '*zhi*¹ (know) *mei*³ (beauty)' with the main sentence '*wei*² (consider as) *mei*³ (beauty)': literally this passage could be rendered as something like 'when under heaven all consider the beauty they know as beauty...'

Notice also that the sound, and therefore the Pinyin romanisation, does not uniquely identify a Chinese term: *zhi*¹ (know) and *zhi*¹ ('s) have exactly the same sound but are two different words (and two different characters). Every Chinese word is a single syllable, but there are much more words in Chinese than syllables (even considering the tones, see *Pinyin* below). Modern Chinese partly obviates this by joining two characters to uniquely identify a concept.

Pinyin

The correct pronunciation of Mandarin Chinese is not easy for Western speakers. The best way to get a sufficiently accurate idea of the sounds is to listen to a native speaker. The following indications may do as a first approximation to the pronunciation of Pinyin.

The sounds of consonants and vowels in the Pinyin romanisation roughly resemble their English counterparts, except as indicated below. Notice that Pinyin, like all other systems of transliteration of Chinese, is not based on the distinction between consonants and vowels, but on that between initials and finals. Each word (i.e. syllable) consists of an initial (a consonant) and a final

(one or more vowels). The following tables indicate the pronunciation of initials and finals where they are markedly different from standard English pronunciation.

Pronunciation of initials

Pinyin	Explanation
<i>b</i>	unaspirated p , as in spit ; as in bit in a toneless syllable
<i>p</i>	strongly aspirated p , as in pit
<i>d</i>	unaspirated t , as in stop ; as in dot in a toneless syllable
<i>t</i>	strongly aspirated t , as in top
<i>g</i>	unaspirated k , as in skill ; as in gill in a toneless syllable
<i>k</i>	strongly aspirated k , as in kill
<i>j</i>	Like cheek , with the lips spread wide. Curl the tip of the tongue downwards to stick it at the back of the teeth, no aspiration.
<i>q</i>	Like cheek , with the lips spread wide. Curl the tip of the tongue downwards to stick it at the back of the teeth and strongly aspirate.
<i>x</i>	Like she , with the lips spread and the tip of your tongue curled downwards and stuck to the back of teeth.
<i>zh</i>	Rather like ch (a sound between choke , joke , true , and drew , tongue tip curled more upwards).
<i>ch</i>	as in chin , but with the tongue curled upwards; similar to nurture in American English, but strongly aspirated.
<i>r</i>	Similar to the English z in azure and r in reduce , but with the tongue curled upwards, like a cross between English "r" and French "j".
<i>z</i>	similar to something between suds and cats , no aspiration.
<i>c</i>	like the English ts in cats , but strongly aspirated.

Pronunciation of finals

To find a given final:

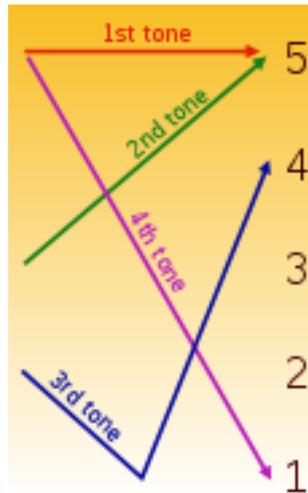
1. Remove the initial consonant. *Zh*, *ch*, and *sh* count as initial consonants.
2. Change initial *w* to *u* and initial *y* to *i*. For *weng*, *wei*, *you*, look under *ong*, *ui*, *iu*.
3. For *u* after *j*, *q*, *x*, or *y*, look under *ü*.

Pinyin	Explanation
<i>-i</i>	-i is a buzzed continuation of the consonant following <i>z-</i> , <i>c-</i> , <i>s-</i> , <i>zh-</i> , <i>ch-</i> , <i>sh-</i> or <i>r-</i> . In all other words, -i has the sound of bee .
<i>ao</i>	approximately as in " cow "; the <i>a</i> is much more audible than the <i>o</i>
<i>ou</i>	as in " so "
<i>an</i>	starts with plain continental "a" and ends with "n"
<i>en</i>	as in " taken "

<i>er</i>	similar to the sound in "teacher" in American English
<i>i</i>	like English <i>bee</i> .
<i>ia</i>	as i + a ; like English "yard"
<i>io</i>	as i + plain continental "o"
<i>ie</i>	as i + ê ; but is very short
<i>iao</i>	as i + ao
<i>iu</i>	as i + ou
<i>ian</i>	like English yen
<i>u</i>	like English "oo"; pronounced as <i>ü</i> after j, q, x and y
<i>ua</i>	as u + a
<i>uo</i>	as u + o ; the <i>o</i> is pronounced shorter and lighter than in the <i>o</i> final
<i>uai</i>	as u + ai like English why
<i>ui</i>	as u + ei ; here the <i>i</i> is pronounced like <i>ei</i>
<i>uan</i>	as u + an ; pronounced as <i>üan</i> after j, q, x and y
<i>un</i>	as u + en ; like the <i>on</i> in the English <i>won</i> ; pronounced as <i>ün</i> after j, q, x and y
<i>uang</i>	as u + ang ; like the <i>ang</i> in English <i>angst</i> or <i>anger</i>
<i>weng</i>	as u + eng
<i>u, ü</i>	as in German " üben " or French " lune "
<i>ue, üe</i>	as ü + ê ; the <i>ü</i> is short and light
<i>uan</i>	as ü + ê + n ;
<i>un</i>	as ü + n ;
<i>iong</i>	as ü + ong

Tones

Chinese is a tonal language: the same syllable, pronounced with a different tone is a completely different word. There are four main tones and a fifth neutral tone. These are indicated by a number affixed to the syllable (as a superscript in this book). The following graph may give an approximate idea of the four main tones. The horizontal axis represents time. On the vertical axis the sound's pitch is shown: 1 is the lowest, 5 the highest pitch.



(from Wikipedia)

1st tone	high and continuous
2nd tone	ascending
3rd tone	descending, then ascending
4th tone	fast, descending, shorter than the other tones

A note on gender

The Chinese text of the *Laozi* is largely unspecific about gender. Even though traditional Chinese culture is undoubtedly patriarchal, in a book that emphasises the feminine as a privileged way of access to the Dao it seems inappropriate to stick to the old convention of using the masculine as the general case. In order to avoid the heaviness of constantly repeating 'he or she', 'his or her', I have chosen to alternate freely between the masculine and the feminine throughout the text. Therefore, e.g., I say in Chapter 49: "The sage always has no mind of her own," and in Chapter 81: "The sage does not hoard: he takes care of others..."

